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Ben Burr, Executive Director
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October 25, 2021

Ryan Nehl
Manti-La Sal National Forest Supervisor's Office
599 West Price River Drive
Price, UT 84501

Dear Mr. Nehl,

BlueRibbon Coaliton/ShareTrails (BRC) is writing to provide feedback for the Manti-La Sal National Forest Revised Management Plan. BRC is a national non-profit organization that champions responsible recreation and encourages a strong conservation ethic and individual stewardship. We champion responsible use of public lands and waters for the benefit of all recreationists by educating and empowering our members to secure, protect, and expand shared outdoor recreation access and use by working collaboratively with natural resource managers and other recreationists. Our members use motorized and non-motorized means of recreation, including OHVs, horses, mountain bikes, and hiking to enjoy federally managed lands throughout the United States, including those of the Forest Service. Many of our members and supporters live in Utah or travel across the country to visit Utah and use motorized vehicles to access USFS managed lands throughout Utah. BRC members visit the Manti-La Sal Nationa Forest for motorized recreation, snowmobiling, sightseeing, photography, rockhounding, hunting, wildlife and nature study, camping, observing cultural resources, and other similar pursuits. BRC members and supporters have concrete, definite, and immediate plans to continue such activities in the future.

Many of our members hold organized events that include organized rides in this area. A significant portion of the education mission of organizations like ours and the fundraising that supports organizations like ours comes from these organized events, and we see the continuation of these events as an integral expression of protected rights including freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

We support any additional comments that encourage the USFS to designate the maximum number of routes in this area as open. Many of our members are organizations with extensive on-the-ground experience. If any route or area specific comments are made which identify missing routes or errors in Recreation Opportunity Spectrum maps that lead to restricted access, we support USFS addressing these comments in the development of an alternative that maximizes motorized recreation access to the planning area. We strongly advocate against a "conservation alternative" as this area is already surrounded by and includes, wilderness areas and highly restrictive management areas. Specifically, we support any comments made by Capital Trail Vehicle Association, Ride with Respect, Sage Rider Motorcycle Club, Utah Snowmobile Association, Utah Public Lands Alliance, and any other groups that advocate for multiple use.

The Manti-La Sal Area is an incredibly popular area for off-highway use and dispersed camping. It covers large areas throughout Utah. In the southern portion it is surrounded by Dark Canyon Wilderness Area, Bears Ears National Monument, Arches National Park and Canyonlands National Park. In other words, this travel area is completely surrounded by land managed with aggressive restrictions on motorized recreation, dispersed camping, and other forms of outdoor recreation, USFS should work to maximize OHV use in this area, since minimization of OHV related impacts occurs by land management designations in surrounding areas.

Users with Disabilities

We recommend that the USFS use this planning process to finally begin to reverse its decades-long systematic discrimination against those with mobility impairment-related disabilities.

On his first day in office, President Joe Biden issued an "Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government." This executive order established "an ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda" which focuses on addressing "entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies," and mandates a

“comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.”

Under this executive order, “The term ‘equity’ means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as ... persons with disabilities....” Historically, there has been no group more greatly marginalized and excluded by public land management policies, and motorized travel management policies in particular, than people with disabilities. Outdoor enthusiasts with ambulatory disabilities frequently rely on motorized travel as their sole means to enjoy recreating on public lands. Not everyone has the ability to hike into a remote wilderness area, but many such people are still able to drive Jeeps, side-by-sides, and ATVs, which are restricted to the designated motorized route network.

Travel management policies focused on “minimizing” the environmental impacts of motorized recreation have resulted in a dramatic decrease in motorized recreation opportunities on public lands over the last 20 years which has disproportionately impacted people with disabilities. Wilderness focused environmental groups with extreme ableist baises have pushed for more and more areas to be closed to motorized recreation and reserved exclusively for hikers, mountain bikers, and other “human powered” and “quiet use” forms of recreation in which many people with disabilities are unable to participate.

Every time motorized routes or areas are closed, people with disabilities that require the use of motorized means to access public lands are barred from those areas forever. There has been little recourse for such people in the past because the Americans With Disabilities Act does not require public land management agencies to consider disproportionate effects on the disabled community, but only requires that they be given access to public lands on equal terms with everyone else. As a result, the USFS has historically failed to give any real consideration to the impacts of motorized route closures on the disabled community when developing travel management plans.

The Biden Administration’s focus on equity, however, changes the equation. While the ADA focuses only on equality of opportunity, equity inherently focuses on equality of outcome. Any policy that is facially neutral but disproportionately harms a disadvantaged or marginalized group is considered inequitable. The USFS is therefore required by this executive order and

others mandating that federal agencies consider “environmental justice” in NEPA proceedings to consider whether any route closures in the Manti-La Sal management plan would disproportionately harm disabled users’ ability to access public lands.

Any approach to travel management that presumes the superiority of non-motorized forms of recreation like hiking over motorized recreation, or that justifies closing motorized access on the basis that people can still hike on those routes, is inherently discriminatory toward people with disabilities. Any large-scale closures of existing routes would unfairly and inequitably deprive people with disabilities of the ability to recreate in the area using the only means available to them. It is imperative that the USFS consider the access needs of disabled users in drafting the alternatives for this travel plan and ensure that people with disabilities who depend on motorized means do not lose access.

Plan Specific Feedback

In Chapter 2.10 of the plan the Goals section 01 states, “Develop and maintain volunteer programs, partnerships, and conservation education opportunities to engage the public in stewardship of natural and cultural resources.”

BRC Response: We have seen where USFS has unilaterally terminated volunteer agreements with motorized user groups with no definable process to address USFS concerns. While we support the FS development of volunteer programs, volunteers should have processes for protecting the goodwill they earn through volunteering with the FS.

Desired Conditions 01: Recreation opportunities reflect the unified Manti-La Sal’s recreation niche, to be a forest rich in family tradition, that provides a well-connected system of Byways, Backways and trails with spectacular views, interpretation of ancient landscapes, and dispersed recreation opportunities for visitors to escape the routine of life and enjoy their Forest in a less structured setting.

BRC Response: We support dispersed recreation opportunities and this wording is important because those supporting a “conservation alternative” have commissioned biased studies to justify concentrating recreation into only hardened areas. Dispersal strategies for managing recreation are categorically better at minimizing impacts and are the best way for the FS to fulfill its multiple use mission.

Desired Conditions 04: High-quality motorized winter recreation opportunities are provided, including winter use parking in high-use areas. Non-motorized winter recreation areas provide for quiet winter recreation opportunities where designated.

BRC Response: *Generally we support this, but it doesn't recognize that the hybrid users who use motorized access also participate in non-motorized use. To assume these two uses have to be mutually exclusive is conceding too much and generally is a response to contrived user conflict that only flows one way. You never hear of motorized users working to restrict non-motorized access.*

Objectives 04: Coordinate with state, county, and municipal governments as well as volunteer groups to plow winter trailheads and provide trail grooming annually.

BRC Response: We support coordination with local governments and volunteers for these projects. Once resources from these public sources get used, USFS needs to recognize the expanded public interest and permanently remove areas with concentrated coordination efforts from potential closure in future processes such as travel management planning.

Objectives 06: Designate motorized winter recreation opportunities across the Forest and develop a corresponding over-snow vehicle use map within the life of the plan.

BRC Response: This is where Recreation Opportunity Spectrum designations could play an outsized role in determining future outcomes from the OSV use map. "Across the Forest" is a broad phrase that really means "Across the semi-primitive motorized areas of the forest." The Semi-primitive Nonmotorized ROS does acknowledge potential motorized inclusions, but it isn't clear how those inclusions will be determined. We oppose any ROS designations that could set the stage for OSV closures of OSV areas that are currently in use when an OSV use map is developed.

Guidelines 07: Dispersed sites, areas, and travel routes should be closed, either permanently or seasonally, when a high risk of damage to cultural, aquatic or wildlife resources occurs, or user conflicts, or health and safety are compromised.

BRC Response: This guideline should be stricken from the plan. It predetermines closure as a legitimate almost hardwired response to issues that can all be managed through other management strategies. NEPA requires analysis of impacts to everything on this list, and

managers should have flexibility to find other ways to mitigate impact besides temporary or permanent closure.

Management Strategies: Focus future priorities on data collected via National Visitor Use Monitoring surveys conducted every 5 years. This data includes indicators on activity participation, demographics, visit duration, visitor satisfaction, and trip spending across the forest.

BRC Response: *In order to comply with President Biden's Executive Order on Serving Underserved Communities, these surveys should be updated to document USFS use by those with physical disabilities - including mobility impairment disabilities to determine if USFS policy that restricts motorized use leads to systematic discrimination against those with mobility impairment disability.*

In Chapter 2.10.1 we want to share concerns about the following sections:

Desired Conditions 05: Motorized route density in the Semi-Primitive Motorized classes averages 1.7 miles per square mile or less to provide for wildlife security.

BRC Response: The 1.7 miles per square mile is arbitrary. How did they get to this number and what best available science did they use to suggest this would provide for wildlife security. Consider another program that is currently open for public comment: https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?projectId=104843 In Yellowstone they have been monitoring OSV impact on wildlife, and have found OSV use and route proximity to wildlife has no impact: 1) Winter wildlife monitoring data from 2014 to 2019 showed 95% of wildlife in proximity
(within 500 feet) to the groomed road corridor demonstrated no response or a "look and resume" response to oversnow vehicles.
2) Observations during this period included 1,105 groups of wildlife and 6,715 individual animals.
3) Similar monitoring efforts prior to the SEIS in 2013 found roughly 91% of wildlife were observed to demonstrate no response or a "look and resume" response.

Standards 01: New roads and motorized trails shall not be located within the Semi Primitive Nonmotorized and Primitive classes. Existing roads and motorized trails in these classes shall be considered for closure in Travel Planning.

BRC Response: This is pretty problematic. USFS should acknowledge that the Categorical Exclusions that apply for construction of new roads and trails should be applicable to these classes. In many cases these exclusions are for rerouting existing routes because of erosion events, or creating roads to do vegetation treatments that reduce the risk of catastrophic fire. ROS designations should apply only to recreation use and not create unnecessary restrictions on the Forest for adaptive and active management that relates to other uses. As written, this section will inevitably lead to road and trail closures.

Guidelines 03: Resource management activities, including but not limited to timber harvests, livestock grazing, wildlife habitat improvements, vegetation treatments, mineral exploration and developments, and special uses should only occur in Semi-Primitive Non-motorized class areas if they both meet the location's scenery integrity objective and maintain a high-quality non-motorized recreation opportunity.

BRC Response: This is related to the previous point. It's a nice try, but still problematic. Vegetation treatments that reduce wildfire risk might compromise the current scenery integrity or non motorized recreation opportunity, but if a wildfire happens the impact of the fire will likely cause a greater impact to both of these values. Decision makers should be able to make balance of harm or benefit determinations for these resource management activities instead of being required to meet arbitrary objectives.

In Chapter 2.10.2 Recreation Special Use Permits we have the following feedback:

Guidelines 01: Restrictions on all recreation permitted special uses should be applied where user conflicts are identified.

BRC Response: User conflict is an arbitrary term and shouldn't be the sole justification for restrictions. It would be better to say "All recreation permitted special uses should include mutually acceptable provisions to minimize user conflict as part of the terms and conditions of the permit. Restrictions should only be pursued for permittees who violate terms and conditions. Their access to the forest and livelihood shouldn't be at the mercy of subjective grievances from pathologically disgruntled users who are politically conditioned by special interest groups to weaponize "user conflict" to enforce reduced access.

In the Access section (pg. 64)

Desired Conditions 06: Road and motorized trail use do not impact wildlife winter range and quiet winter recreation opportunities.

BRC Response: Refer to previous comment with regards to low impact of motorized recreation Yellowstone wildlife monitoring.

Desired Conditions 08: Roads and trails are not generally used when covered with snow or saturated soils to prevent damage to the travel way, associated features and other resources.

BRC Response: There should be an exclusion here for the obvious case where OSV use is appropriate for a trail covered with snow.

Objectives 03: Update Motor Vehicle Use Maps, also known as MVUMs, annually to identify all motorized use routes open to visitors.

BRC Response: Updating MVUMs is good, but this section is in conflict with other sections that require closures of non-recognized routes. If non-recognized routes are automatically closed, then there would be no need to update MVUMs. See our feedback on Guidelines 08.

Objectives 05: Maintain to standard a minimum of 100 miles of nonmotorized trail and 80 miles of motorized trail annually.

BRC Response: *Again, these are arbitrary numbers, and it is odd that preference is given to nonmotorized use. These should at least be equal.*

Guidelines 08: Roads and trails not on the system should be closed to motorized use, unless motorized use is authorized under permit.

BRC Response: Given Objectives 05, it would be more consistent to say Roads and Trails not on the system should be included in the annual MVUM update and the annual MVUM update should determine their final designation as open or closed.

Guidelines 10: Seasonal motorized use area closures should be used to protect wildlife winter range and opportunities for quiet winter recreation.
BRC Response: See comments above about Yellowstone wildlife monitoring.

2.15 Fire and Fuels Management

Management Approaches: Treatments for fuel reduction may include planned and unplanned ignitions as well as non- fire techniques including but not limited to mechanical thinning.

BRC Response: The USFS should be using non-fire techniques such as mechanical thinning as often as possible to keep the forest healthy and thriving. These techniques are the most effective in preserving wildlife, trails and cultural sites. We prefer proactive management within the forest to avoid closures, such as closures due to the Seely, Trail Mountain, and Pack Creek wildfires.

We would like to close by saying we support "shared use". As long as overall visitation numbers are appropriate for the affected resources, motorized and non-motorized users can be compatible with one another so long as individual users understand designations and plan their activities accordingly. Indeed, motorized and nonmotorized recreation use often overlap as OHV's often increase accessibility to non-motorized recreational activities such as hiking, camping, equestrian use, etc. We also hold that responsible recreational use of public lands can exist in harmony with ecosystem needs.

BRC would like to be considered an interested public for this project. Information can be sent to the following address and email address:

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Sincerely,

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